



PERSONALIZED LEARNING FOR ALL: ACTIONS FOR STATES TO MAKE ASPIRATIONS A REALITY

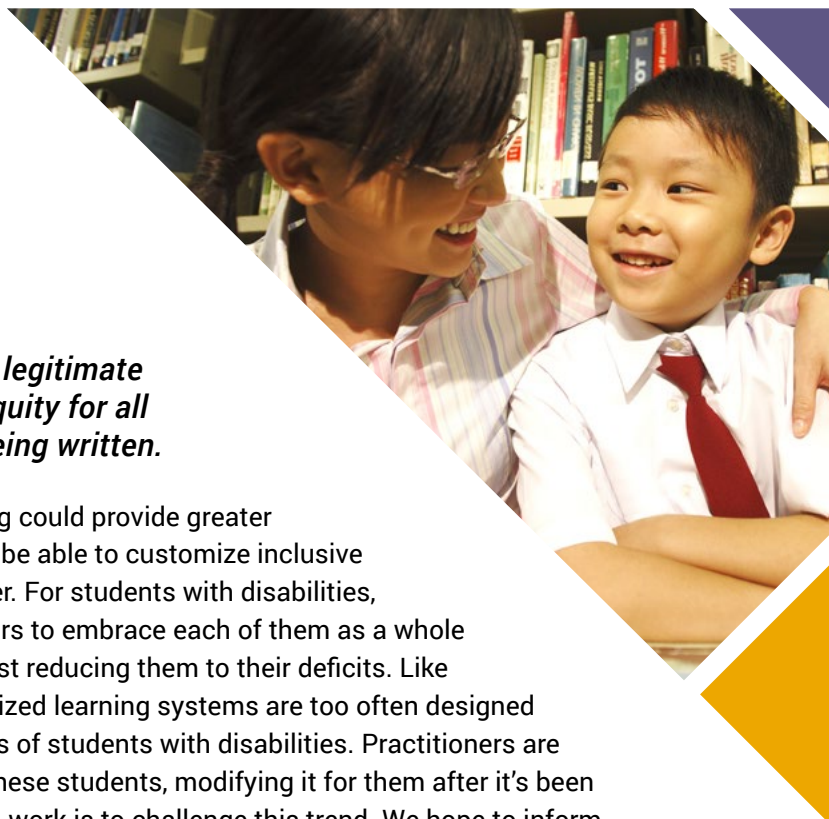
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Is personalized learning a passing fad, or is it a legitimate means to provide educational excellence and equity for all students? The answer to this question is still being written.

If designed and implemented well, personalized learning could provide greater flexibility for all learners. Educators and schools would be able to customize inclusive learning opportunities to meet the needs of each learner. For students with disabilities, personalized learning offers an opportunity for educators to embrace each of them as a whole student, with strengths and weaknesses, rather than just reducing them to their deficits. Like most other education reform efforts, however, personalized learning systems are too often designed and implemented without taking into account the needs of students with disabilities. Practitioners are forced to retrofit the new reform to meet the needs of these students, modifying it for them after it's been implemented. The goal of NCLD's personalized learning work is to challenge this trend. We hope to inform personalized learning implementation with the best practices from special education, and to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are fully included at the outset.

Considering the needs of students with disabilities in the design of the system requires honest conversations and dedicated action, not only about the benefits personalized learning can offer these students but also about the inherent challenges. The benefits and challenges often end up being two sides of the same coin—the potential of personalized learning and the work necessary to achieve that potential. In interviews with close to 100 leaders in Colorado, New Hampshire, and North Carolina, including expert practitioners, researchers, policy leaders, parents, and others, NCLD identified the following benefits and associated challenges for students with disabilities in these new systems:

- **A strengths-based, student-focused approach to education ... if we can prepare teachers to shift their practice and mindsets.**
- **A more positive, engaging experience for parents ... if they are included as partners from the beginning.**
- **Increased engagement and development of skills critical to 21st century success ... if we don't lose sight of accountability.**
- **Continuous, ongoing support for students ... if we invest in creating a sustainable system.**
- **Multiple ways to access content ... if accessibility is included in the initial strategic development.**
- **Fuller inclusion ... if we don't lose sight of real student needs.**
- **The value of special education principles ... if we overcome rigidity.**



Exploration of these challenges and benefits reveals that the success of personalized learning for students with disabilities is not a foregone conclusion. Addressing the challenges requires attention and effort on the part of stakeholders throughout the system. Through constructive conversations with key leaders across our three states, several action steps emerged to ensure the success of students with disabilities in personalized learning systems:

Action Step #1: Establish an inclusive vision for personalized learning efforts from the beginning of design and planning.

Action Step #2: Ensure sufficient resources to provide accommodations and supports to help students with disabilities fully participate in personalized learning efforts.

Action Step #3: Train general and special educators to implement personalized learning inclusively.

Action Step #4: Use comprehensive accountability and support systems to ensure access to and rigor of quality learning experiences for all students.

Action Step #5: Invest in pilot programs that test strategies around personalized learning, and ensure that pilot programs have a means to learn and disseminate learning around implementation opportunities and challenges for students with disabilities.

Action Step #6: Communicate with and engage families from program initiation to implementation of personalized learning efforts.

Students with disabilities and their educators and families are no strangers to “innovation.” But because innovation usually begins with the average learner in mind and then builds out, innovative programs are often slow to reach those who are struggling or who excel. As the personalized learning movement expands and gathers steam, it invites a paradigm shift that could have profound positive effects for students with disabilities. The question now is one of will: Do we have the will to make the investments and commitments necessary to ensure that these personalized learning efforts achieve their full potential to transform learning?



INTRODUCTION

Jack Bradley has been given many labels over the years. His formal diagnoses include autism, Tourette syndrome, a written expression disorder, dysgraphia, ADHD, and hearing problems related to microcephaly, a condition in which a baby is born with a smaller head than expected.

He has slow processing speed, especially in writing. He has had a hard time learning to do things like tie his shoes and go up and down stairs. But he's also considered academically gifted and is incredibly articulate. Though Jack has disabilities, in many ways he is just like every kid—he has strengths and he has challenges, things he is great at and things he struggles with. This highlights a fundamental question often posed in the education system: How do you successfully address Jack's challenges while drawing out and building on his skills, strengths, and interests?

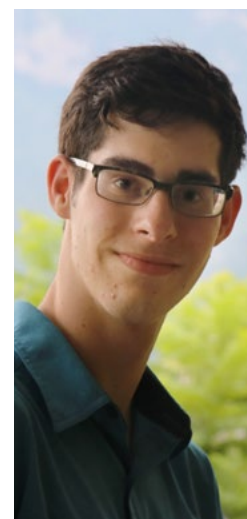
Jack's own educational experiences have been varied. He has suffered both exclusion and bullying throughout his academic career, but he's also had opportunities to present his perspectives on education before large conferences of practitioners and policy leaders. Currently, Jack attends a STEM magnet high school. He spends half his time in a special education program designed to address specific challenges related to autism and other disabilities. And he spends the rest in accelerated Advanced Placement and dual-enrollment classes. His special education class provides him more time and support to study and work on homework. The plan implemented for him allows him to take his more rigorous courses earlier in the day when he has more energy.

Jack is the first to note that his school's efforts around personalization are far from perfect.

Teachers are not trained to meet his diverse needs—to support his accelerated learning while also providing remedial supports and accommodations. However, the school is moving in the right direction. Its efforts are reflective of a broader movement in personalized learning, one that is taking constructive steps but is far from meeting its full potential. The question moving forward is one of will: Do we have the will to make the investments and commitments necessary to ensure that these personalized learning efforts achieve their full potential to transform learning?

**Personalized learning
should be the norm, not the
exception, and not just for
'dis' abled students."**

— Jack Bradley



I. PERSONALIZED LEARNING AND THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

More than 40 states have some sort of policy to advance personalized learning, ranging from pilot programs and waivers to broader policy changes.* None of these policies look exactly alike and none would define the notion of personalized learning in exactly the same way. Many definitions, however, reflect the one NCLD uses to define personalized learning. These include embracing the whole student—including each student’s needs, skills, and interests; providing the student greater ownership over his or her learning; facilitating greater flexibility in where, when, how, and through whom learning takes place; and deepening connections with peers, teachers, and other adults.[†] If implemented effectively, this vision of learning can have transformative effects on the learning of all students.

While there is much more work to be done in U.S. schools to support all students in attaining the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for postsecondary success, some students—including those with disabilities—have fared worse than others. This is reflected in gaps in test scores, high school graduation rates, post-secondary education attendance and completion rates, and employment rates, among other measures. It is increasingly clear to students, parents, educators, community members, and policymakers that changing these trends and the lives of those they represent requires more than simply tinkering around the edges.

As a strategy, personalized learning has the potential to create a paradigm shift in affecting these outcomes. Strategies associated with personalized learning can support clearer, higher expectations for all students; empower student agency and self-determination skills that can positively impact postsecondary outcomes; and direct opportunities and supports to both address student needs and build on their interests. At the same time, given the many different ways personalized learning is defined and implemented, simply having an initiative called “personalized learning” doesn’t guarantee these benefits. Achieving these benefits requires states, districts, schools, and educators to address both the unique challenges and the benefits that personalized learning initiatives and programs present to students with disabilities.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING DEFINED



A process where students’ learning experiences—what they learn, and how, when, where, and through whom they learn it—are tailored to their individual needs, skills, and interests, and enable them to take ownership of their learning.

Although where, how, when, and through whom they learn might vary according to their needs, students also develop deep connections to each other, their teachers, and other adults. For example, a student studying biology can demonstrate understanding of the same rigorous standards in a classroom, in a postsecondary dual-enrollment setting, or in an internship at a science lab. Students can learn from their teachers, postsecondary faculty, or industry professionals; during school, after school, or during summer break; and demonstrate their mastery of concepts in whichever way best meets their individual learning needs.

II. AN EXPERIENCE WITH PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN THREE STATES: OUR METHODOLOGY

To identify the challenges and opportunities inherent in personalized learning, NCLD set out on a yearlong exploration of personalized learning in three states: New Hampshire, Colorado, and North Carolina.

These states were chosen because they not only reflect geographic and demographic diversity, but are at different stages of implementing personalized learning. New Hampshire has had over two decades of experience in implementing their competency-based initiatives, while efforts in Colorado¹ and North Carolina are more recent. Additionally, each state reflects different histories, contexts, and policy environments. At NCLD, we believe the diversity represented in these states can be helpful to policymakers and can inform practices and policies in all states.

In all three states, NCLD interviewed key stakeholders about their views on personalized learning in relation to students with disabilities. These stakeholders included state policy leaders in special and general education, master practitioners, researchers, parent advocates, and others. We asked every individual interviewed (96 across the three states) three questions:

1. How do you define *personalized learning*?
2. What are the unique benefits in that definition for students with disabilities?
3. What are the unique challenges in that definition for students with disabilities?

Our interviews revealed several common threads among all states and all stakeholders. Specifically, there was a common vision of personalized learning that reflected:

- A form of learning that is student-centered and student-led rather than adult-driven
- A focus on interests and strengths in addition to challenges students face
- An approach to learning as a process facilitated by relationships rather than an end that a student gets to
- A commitment to keep learning a constant, but to provide flexibility in where, when, how, and through whom learning happens

¹ Colorado in recent years has taken a number of steps in modifying graduation requirements and exploring other policies supportive of personalized learning, such as performance assessments. But the state's efforts have been affected by changes in leadership at their Department of Education, State Board, and General Assembly

III. THE CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The challenges and benefits for students with disabilities in personalized learning implementation are often two sides of the same coin: The benefit is the aspiration of these initiatives and the challenge is the difficult conversations and work necessary to make that aspiration a reality.

A strengths-based, student-focused approach to education ... if we can prepare educators to shift their practice and mindsets.

One of the greatest benefits of personalized learning stems from a concern that, much like a medical model, special education is often more focused on addressing the student's learning challenges than in recognizing and building on the student's inherent strengths. This reduces students to their deficit, overlooking the whole child. Personalized learning is a more holistic, strengths-based approach to learning, focusing on each student's strengths and assets, while also addressing the challenges students bring to the educational process. For students with disabilities, personalized learning can unlock a whole part of them—their strengths and interests—which can and should help them learn, grow and thrive.

The challenge with realizing this potential, however, often lies not with the student but with the adult—educators are often ill-prepared to take on the new roles encouraged by personalized learning. They may have even fewer of the skills they need to successfully implement personalized learning for students with disabilities. These skills include the capacity to implement frameworks like Universal Design for Learning (UDL), to use a multi-tier system of supports (MTSS), to interpret data, to problem-solve collaboratively with their peers, and much more. In addition, success is not simply a matter of skill, but of mindset. To fully include students with disabilities in personalized learning, educators must examine underlying biases they may have about what students with disabilities can do, and work to change the low expectations that are often placed on these students. Two-thirds of students with disabilities spend more than 80 percent of their days in general education classrooms. General educators implementing personalized learning must be prepared to be educators for all students, including those with disabilities.

A more positive, engaging experience for parents ... if they are included as partners from the beginning.

An additional educator skill that is important for the successful implementation of personalized learning is family engagement. The need to



engage parents is not a unique need specific to parents of students with disabilities. It is essential to the success of any initiative. However, given the unique needs of their children, additional consideration is warranted in how families of students with disabilities are engaged. In traditional systems, parents of students with disabilities are rarely viewed as partners in their children's learning. They may be kept at arm's length due to a fear of legal challenges about their child's education. But as personalized learning shifts the way we educate students—changing the focus from a student's challenges to a student's strengths, setting higher standards for learning, and creating greater flexibility in learning opportunities—educators can feel more at ease in engaging parents as constructive partners in their children's education.

While meaningful engagement of families of students with disabilities is often seen as an essential function, it's rarely clear whose responsibility it is. Forming this relationship often slips through the cracks. Families end up not being engaged and not knowing how to become partners. They may not understand why changes brought about by personalized learning are necessary, or what it will mean for their child. Success in this area demands a dedicated communications and engagement plan to ensure that parents of students with disabilities have a full understanding of these efforts and the opportunities they have to support their children's success.

Increased engagement and development of skills critical to 21st century success ... if we don't lose sight of accountability.

One of the greatest benefits of personalized learning is the ability to ensure that students are prepared with the full breadth of knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success in the

Personalized learning has a tremendous opportunity to meet the needs of each student, but ongoing, job-embedded PD is essential to make it work. Teachers need support and coaching in developing learning environments, and instruction that ensures they have the content and strategies needed to help each student reach their potential. Principals need support to transform a school culture, help teachers try new things, and provide a vision for guiding their teachers, students, parents, and community members on this path. Personalized learning is hard work—and we must ensure that teachers and administrators have the skills and ongoing coaching to make this a reality for all students."

— Dr. Mary Ann Wolf, Director of Digital Learning Programs, Friday Institute for Educational Innovation



21st century. A large body of research confirms a stark reality in education: Whether a student has a disability or not, success in the 21st century demands more than a basic understanding of academic content. Students must master knowledge, skills, and dispositions to navigate a world that emphasizes less rote recall and more transferable knowledge. Advocates argue that by emphasizing greater student agency in driving learning and placing a greater weight on skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication, personalized learning can better prepare all students for a successful postsecondary future. Additionally, self-advocacy and self-determination—skills that have proven to be critical for students with disabilities—are more readily developed and exercised in student-driven, personalized learning environments.

While this potential is exciting, a question for skeptics and advocates alike is how to ensure that a strong focus on these skills doesn't become a replacement for high academic expectations for all students. For example, in an effort to develop collaboration skills in group projects, it is possible that students with disabilities will be assigned the less rigorous and less relevant tasks, thus not having the opportunity to learn the skills that all students need to master to succeed. In addition, increased flexibility in when and how learning happens can result in educators believing that students with disabilities should move at a slower pace than others. Educators who think this may not engage and challenge these students, and may fail to provide them with a rigorous education. To prevent such pitfalls, high expectation in content and skills as well as accountability and flexibility must go hand in hand.



“The best teaching and learning happens when teachers build authentic relationships with their students and are able to direct curriculum to the strengths, needs, and interests of the child. Personalized learning is

not an adaptation for some children, but rather it is a mindset of teaching that is best for all children.”

– Bobbie Cavnar, 2016 North Carolina Teacher of the Year

Continuous, ongoing support for students... if we invest in creating a sustainable system.

As personalized learning brings with it more flexibility and the ability to focus on student strengths and needs, it must also provide appropriate interventions and supports to ensure student success. In a flexible system such as personalized learning—where the time and place of learning may change—progress monitoring and targeted interventions are critical. Rather than waiting until a student falls far behind and fails to meet important milestones in learning, especially in settings that allow for competency-based learning, educators in personalized learning systems are continuously using and reflecting on formative assessments. Students need to be assessed for understanding, progress, and readiness to demonstrate mastery. The assessments must identify specific competencies, challenges, and strengths students are experiencing and then target rapid, ongoing, and continuous supports to help maximize

student learning. Schools must reflect on formative and summative measures to ensure that they are intervening appropriately and are dedicating resources to support the success of all students, including those with disabilities.

While ongoing progress monitoring and support are critical to transforming the learning experience of students with disabilities, few areas in the country have mastered it. Many districts are struggling to solve staffing, scheduling, and other resource constraints. For students with disabilities and their peers, personalized learning cannot take the place of a strong intervention and support system—personalized learning must simply be a means of delivering on such a system. Translating this aspiration into reality depends not only on how we support educators in schools currently implementing personalized learning, but in how educator preparation programs are preparing the next generation of teachers to succeed in 21st century classrooms.

Multiple ways to access content ... if accessibility is included in the initial strategic development.

The traditional education system takes a one-size-fits-all approach and treats every student the same way. But personalized learning offers an opportunity to provide greater flexibility in how students are presented information, how they engage with the content, and how they represent their learning—the underpinnings of UDL. This can allow struggling students to flourish and can provide them with better access to rigorous learning experiences.

Few districts have undergone the mindset shift required to fully embed the principles of UDL in their district and school decision-making process, including decisions around curriculum adoption, technology procurement, and a variety of other areas important to the workings of personalized learning. UDL is a set of guidelines and principles that direct educational decision-making and create access to higher levels of learning for all students. A school implementing UDL moves toward representing content and assessing and engaging students in multiple ways. Rather than investing in technology without a clear strategic direction, educators can use UDL to guide them, ensuring that the chosen technology encourages deeper levels of learning, engagement, and inclusivity. In sum, intentionality around strategies like UDL from the beginning of personalized learning efforts can ensure greater accessibility for all students, without the need to retrofit the initiative to reach them.

Fuller inclusion ... if we don't lose sight of real student needs.

Through its design, personalized learning reduces the likelihood that students with disabilities will be separated from and stigmatized by their peers. Research shows that simply being labeled as a student with a disability can itself have detrimental impacts on achievement regardless of prior achievement or present aptitude. Overcoming this bias can be a significant benefit for students with disabilities in personalized learning systems. If personalized learning systems are designed and implemented effectively, it is not that the student's disability does not matter; it is simply that it doesn't define everything about them. In more intentionally inclusive personalized learning systems, all students, whether they have a disability or not, become aware that they all have differences. All students have specific needs and learning challenges that must be addressed, not just students with disabilities. Similarly, all students, including those with disabilities, have strengths and assets to drive advanced learning.

Inclusion does not mean sweeping real needs under the rug. To be successful, personalized learning must not only pay attention to the interests and assets of all students, but must also take into account specific challenges that can make personalized learning difficult for students with disabilities. These challenges can include difficulty responding to change for students on the autism spectrum, executive functioning challenges

for students with learning disabilities, and accessibility issues for students with cognitive or physical disabilities. By being intentional about meeting all these students where they are, personalized learning can provide needed supports in an inclusive setting.



To me, an inclusive school vision of student-centered, personalized learning means that a school community has defined rigorous pathways to success for all students and engaged them in deep, meaningful learning—and

allowed them ample opportunity to demonstrate this learning in various contexts."

— Brian Stack, 2017 New Hampshire Principal of the Year

The value of special education principles ... if we overcome rigidity.

Personalized learning shares many of the goals of special education and embodies some of its best practices. For example, a personalized learning plan (PLP) seeks to provide students and educators with the same tools as a high-quality IEP. Providing students different options to access and engage content is the very essence of UDL. And customized and targeted supports reflect best practices in MTSS systems². While special education addresses the needs of one student at a time, personalized learning can apply these principles across an entire school, removing the stigma related to special education.

² MTSS is an evidence-based and system-wide practice that uses data-based progress monitoring to make decisions and respond to students' academic and behavioral needs through access to instruction delivered in varying intensities.

Nevertheless, in making this a schoolwide initiative, there are certain challenges—including limitations on time, staffing, and resources—that must be overcome to implement personalized learning inclusively. It is important that schools and districts engage with and involve special education stakeholders from the very beginning of these initiatives to foster trust and ensure that personalized learning is something that happens with them, not to them. For example, with early stakeholder engagement, could special educators' roles change in supporting personalized learning? Could they coach other educators in implementing personalized learning inclusively? The resources and knowledge within special education can and should be leveraged toward the equitable implementation of personalized learning efforts.

“Personalized learning is what special educators have been doing all along; having everyone on this page will not only support students with disabilities, but all students.”

– Tobi Chassie, District Administrator, Pittsfield School District, Pittsfield, New Hampshire



CLEARING UP MISCONCEPTIONS: IEPs AND PERSONALIZED LEARNING PLANS



One frequent misconception in personalized learning is that a personalized learning plan (PLP) is simply an IEP for all students, thus making the IEP unnecessary. It does not. As explained by the Vermont Agency of Education, “PLPs articulate the learning experiences that ultimately shape a student’s path to graduation, in accordance with locally developed graduation requirements. IEPs outline the specialized instruction and services needed to help a student with a disability access and progress in the general education curriculum.” Both PLPs and IEPs serve unique purposes and will remain necessary.

IV. SOLUTIONS

If personalized learning is to succeed for all students, a high level of engagement and integration must become the norm within implementation efforts. Within each of the three states, we worked with a group of stakeholders to devise policy and practice solutions that will maximize the benefits of personalized learning for students with disabilities. Six recommendations emerged as the most salient.

Action Step #1: Establish an inclusive vision of personalized learning from the beginning of design and planning.

One message rings clear above all others: Don't retrofit. Students with disabilities and other complex learners need to be the driver of visions and strategic plans for personalized learning efforts. These groups have often been an afterthought to efforts around educational innovation. Their inclusion in this effort must be more explicit.

Personalized learning systems must ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, are empowered to be effective agents and self-advocates for their own learning. Students with disabilities must have access to the same knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for 21st century success that are accessible to other learners. Holding true to this vision requires that states, districts, and schools embarking on personalized learning ask and answer questions related to complex topics:

1. **Vision:** How do the vision and the goals established to advance personalized learning address the needs of students with disabilities? How do the resources deployed by the state, district, and school support this vision?
2. **Staff Capacity:** How do we build capacity and supports within our schools to be able to implement the approach inclusively?
3. **Measures:** How do we know that the efforts have been successful for students with disabilities? What are our benchmark measures?
4. **Continuous Improvement:** How do we ensure continuous learning and improvement in approaches serving students with disabilities?
5. **Engagement:** How do we engage students with disabilities, their families, and communities in the planning and ongoing implementation of these efforts?

While these questions may lead to some challenging conversations, being more intentional at the outset about serving students with disabilities and other traditionally struggling learners will not only help these students, it will create a system that will benefit their peers as well.





Re-imagining the school day for learners is a process. It takes school personnel reflecting on what a day in the life of a student looks like currently—building empathy from multiple perspectives in order to

establish an inclusive view of how the changes can positively impact all students. As we entered the process, we all had a student in our mind that we thought of continually throughout our design and learning phases to remind us of the impact we can have on learners.”

– Nicole Ottmer, Library Technology Educator and former special educator, Colorado Springs School District 11, Colorado

Action Step #2: Ensure sufficient resources to provide accommodations and supports to help students with disabilities fully participate in personalized learning efforts.

While being intentional about an inclusive vision at the outset is important, it must also be backed up by resources. This is an essential step to ensure that students with disabilities are not retrofitted into a system that has been formed without their needs having been considered. Resource deployment can pose a challenge to an inclusive implementation of personalized learning for many reasons, including historical shortfalls in funding for special education and IDEA, issues around economies of scale in educating students with special needs, and the unique needs of students with disabilities in personalized learning systems. Modifications and accommodations in learning management systems, technology, out-of-school learning opportunities, and support systems all will require an investment of resources. Some expenditures (such as for learning management systems) may require larger initial investments and smaller ongoing investments. Other expenditures (such as training and implementation of support systems) may require significant ongoing investments. States, districts, and schools must think creatively so that resources can be leveraged effectively and efficiently. Answering the following questions during planning and implementation efforts can help close the gap between the aspirations of a strategic plan and the fulfillment of those aspirations:

1. **Funding Silos:** How are funding streams at the state, district, and local level being leveraged to address students’ needs in a comprehensive way?
2. **Navigating IEPs:** What are the state and individual school districts’ plans for ensuring that students’ underlying needs are met without placing undue burdens on local sites to leverage staff and resources?

3. **Personalized Learning Special Education Resources:** How do the state's, district's, and school's plans for procurement and resource investment account for the additional needs of students with disabilities in personalized learning systems, including learning management systems, curricula, and technology?
4. **Educator Shortages:** In light of special educator shortages, what are the state's, district's, and school's strategies for recruitment and retention of staff who are skilled in implementing personalized learning for students with disabilities?
5. **Resource Alignment and Integration:** What are the state's, district's, and school's plans to reduce duplication and promote efficiency and integration of resources—including alignment of IEPs and PLPs, integration of UDL and MTSS in the implementation of personalized learning, and more?

A strong short- and long-term plan that effectively answers these questions sends a message to students, their families, and educators that personalized learning is not a fad initiative, but part of a larger effort to deliver on equity, access, and excellence for all students.

Action Step #3: Train general and special educators to implement personalized learning inclusively.

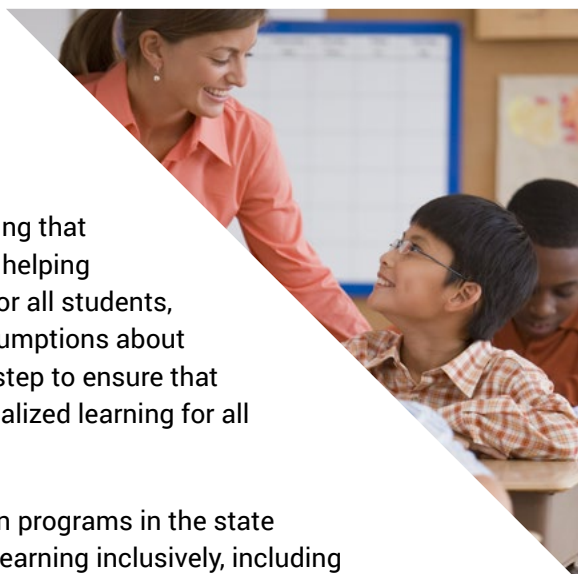
To successfully implement personalized learning, the most important investment any state, district, or school can make is in the professionals charged with implementing these systems. The importance of educator capacity—including general and special educators, principals, specialized instructional support personnel,

The movement of schools and systems to personalized, competency-based education (CBE) models has much promise for students with disabilities. However, if intentionality in planning and implementation are overlooked, our students with disabilities could fall further behind than they would in more traditional models. Two strong safeguards that our leadership team developed to ensure the success of our students with disabilities in a CBE model were: 1. Crafting an inclusive school vision that provided ALL students access to and success in high-value learning opportunities, and 2. Ensuring that human capital, technology resources, assessment frameworks, and targeted supports are specifically designed for and allocated to support students with disabilities."

– Danny Medved, Principal, Denver School of Innovation and Sustainable Design (DSISD)



and other staff—surfaced as the most significant issue of concern and opportunity in all three states. If educators aren’t supported in modifying their practice, then aspirations around more inclusive, supportive, strengths-based environments will never come to fruition. As highlighted earlier, ensuring that educators are supported in developing this capacity is a two-pronged effort: helping educators develop the skills to implement personalized learning strategies for all students, and challenging and erasing biases, low expectations, and deficit-based assumptions about what students can do. Answering the questions below can be an important step to ensure that educators have both the mindsets and the skills to make the most of personalized learning for all students:



1. **General and Special Educator Preparation:** Do educator preparation programs in the state reflect the skills all educators will need to implement personalized learning inclusively, including implementation of UDL and MTSS, data and assessment literacy, and explicit and personalized learning instruction? Does the state have high-quality teacher preparation systems—including preparation programs, credentialing, licensure requirements, and micro-credentialing—to ensure that teachers can demonstrate mastery in these skills?
2. **General and Special Educator Professional Learning:** Has the state, district, or school provided job-embedded professional learning for both general and special educators to ensure that they can effectively implement personalized learning for students with a variety of learning needs?
3. **High Expectations:** Have educators at the school engaged in difficult conversations and reached a common vision around students with disabilities, including their capacity to achieve and to drive their own learning in the personalized learning effort?
4. **Educational Leader Preparation and Development:** Are school leaders prepared and continuously trained in skills to lead schools that implement personalized learning inclusively, such as instructional leadership skills, managing positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) systems, engaging families and communities, and establishing a clear culture of high expectations and supports for both students and educators?
5. **Time for Collaboration:** Do state, district, and school policies respect the need for general and special educators to collaborate on instructional and behavioral needs of all students, including those with disabilities, and support this collaboration through strong professional learning communities and common planning periods?
6. **Flexible Roles:** Do state, district, and school policies and training enable teachers, leaders, counselors, paraprofessionals, and other staff to take on flexible roles in ways that support a more inclusive implementation of personalized learning? Do educator contracts allow for this kind of flexibility?

Personalized learning signifies a new experience for students in education systems—and a new experience for adults as well. By attending to the necessary, difficult conversations about shifting to personalized learning systems, and to the skill needs of educators in navigating this transition, personalized learning efforts can lead to a more enriching educational experience for students and adults in the education system.

Action Step #4: Use comprehensive accountability and support systems to ensure access to and rigor of quality learning experiences for all students.

As personalized learning empowers students to drive their own learning and focuses on a range of competencies essential to college, career, and civic success, we cannot lose sight of the importance of high expectations for students with disabilities. Schools must be held accountable for the success of all students, including those with disabilities. Doing so is the result of decades of hard-fought victories by students, their families, and other advocates to establish these high expectations.

It is important that principles associated with personalized learning—including flexible pacing, varied assessment systems, and multiple measure accountability systems—do not send education back to a time when lack of success among students with disabilities was an expected and accepted norm. This threat to high expectations can permeate not only traditional schools, but also virtual schools. Virtual schools often place themselves under the umbrella of personalized learning, but they remain unregulated and regularly fail to deliver the supports students with disabilities need to succeed.

If personalized learning is to be successful, trusted, and respected, it needs to offer greater flexibility and individualization and require higher expectations, accountability, and supports. The questions below can help ensure that states, districts, and schools meet these goals:

1. **Common, High Expectations:** To the extent possible, are graduation requirements, end-of-course exams, and overall expectations of learning common for students with and without disabilities?¹
2. **Multiple and Varied Assessments:** Are students with and without disabilities provided multiple ways to demonstrate mastery, including performance assessments and other demonstrations of learning that are rigorous and aligned to UDL standards? Are educators engaged in the development and grading of these assessments to ensure that they are instructionally informative? Do alternative assessments inform effective learning for students that maximizes their fullest potential?
3. **Reporting:** Does the state, district, or school provide effective reporting systems that clearly articulate the challenges and strengths of students and the school and potential areas for growth?
4. **Balanced Accountability Systems:** Has the state established an effective multi-measure accountability system with measures that are clear, valid, reliable, and actionable in informing the learning of students with and without disabilities? Do these systems strike an effective balance of growth and proficiency? Are key measures and goals around self-advocacy and self-determination included in the IEP goal-setting process and/or the accountability system?
5. **Intervention and Improvement System:** Have the state, district, and school established an effective MTSS system or another effective, customized intervention system that supports students both in their challenges and in their strengths?

By grappling with and implementing a system that effectively answers the questions above, states, districts, and schools can get beyond an unnecessary dichotomy between flexibility and accountability. The reality is that the success of students with and without disabilities demands both flexibility and accountability. A system that embraces both can lead to equity and excellence for all learners.

¹ Not including those 1 percent of students with the most significant disabilities who are administered alternative assessments.

Action Step #5: Invest in pilot programs that test strategies around personalized learning and ensure that pilot programs have a means to learn from and disseminate learning around implementation opportunities and challenges for students with disabilities.

Students in personalized learning systems are expected to reflect on both their challenges and their strengths. Adults embarking on personalized learning implementation must also embrace a culture of continuous learning and improvement. Such a culture is open to the possibility of constructive failure if it leads to long-term improvement. As states, districts, and schools embrace this culture, it is incumbent on them to set up a system of learning from the challenges and successes of pioneering personalized learning efforts. That way, others that follow them aren't forced to re-invent the wheel! Many states have pilot programs, waivers, and resources for districts and schools that are willing to be the first to try these new approaches to learning and to share their experiences. Answering the questions below can help states, districts, and schools leverage these efforts to establish a vibrant culture of learning, growth, and continuous improvement:

1. **Disability Affinity Groups:** Are there groups of educators that meet in pilot programs implementing personalized learning that meet and discuss challenges and best practices in implementation for students with disabilities? If so, how are those findings disseminated?
2. **Beyond Compliance:** How do states and districts encourage their schools and practitioners to think beyond compliance and foster greater investment in the implementation of personalized learning efforts?
3. **Professional Learning Communities:** Are educators trained to leverage professional learning communities and common planning time to reflect on data and conduct problem-solving to improve their practice for all learners?
4. **Public-Private Partnerships:** Are states encouraging public-private partnerships in both investing in the implementation of personalized learning efforts and in identifying and disseminating best practices for diverse learners?

If our expectation is for students with and without disabilities to engage in bold, collaborative learning and improvement, then the institutions charged with supporting their learning must similarly reflect these values and culture. In this way, the idea of growth mindsets—that intelligence and abilities are not fixed, but can be developed with effort—made famous by researcher Carol Dweck, will not only be associated with our students, but with our education system more broadly.

It's important for schools, districts, and states to take a short-cycle innovation approach so we're not waiting a year or more to see if something is working, but pausing strategically along the way so that we can learn what's working for which students and why."

— Christina Jean, Director of Next Generation Learning, Colorado Education Initiative





“There is often a language barrier between educators and families. Jargon gets in the way, and in the disabilities world, there’s a lot of jargon! Engagement happens when everyone clearly understands what personalized learning

means for their child, their school, and their community, and they feel comfortable enough to ask questions and come back to the table for discussion many times.”

– Robin deAlmeida, Director of Communications, Reaching Higher New Hampshire, and the mother of two children with learning and attention issues

Action Step #6: Communicate with and engage families from program initiation to implementation of personalized learning efforts.

A critical factor in any education initiative—one that proves to be essential time and time again—is the degree to which schools, districts, and states effectively engage with families. Families of students with disabilities and their communities cannot be an afterthought in personalized learning conversations. They must be engaged early and often. There are three realities that relate to families of students with disabilities that must be considered in the implementation of any new approach to learning, including personalized learning. First, many families of students with disabilities are in a position that requires them to be fierce advocates for the rights of their children in school. Second, many families have had poor experiences with “new” approaches to learning, including some that have been implemented haphazardly or in a way that did not benefit their child. Third, states and districts should recognize that all families are likely drawing from their experience with the traditional education system—the one parents themselves may have navigated as students or through parenting older children.

It is critical for schools and districts to take a proactive role in communicating with parents, meaningfully engaging with them to seek input, and to continue this partnership throughout

the life of the program. Constructive answers to the questions below can help the stage for positive working relationships with families of students with disabilities:

1. **Clarity:** Are definitions and logic behind personalized learning efforts presented to families in language that is clear and free from jargon?
2. **Alignment:** How well do personalized learning plans, pathways, and other efforts around personalized learning align with state standards and students’ IEPs?
3. **Multiple Modes of Communication:** Are families provided multiple modes and opportunities for engagement in personalized learning efforts?

4. **Training:** Are workshops and professional learning provided to both families and educators in order to foster more constructive working relationships?

In 2015, NCLD surveyed more than 1,000 parents of students with disabilities about their views of personalized learning. Only 40 percent conveyed that they'd heard of the term *personalized learning*, but 95 percent were interested in learning more. While past experiences may have left some families skeptical, it is clear that many families of students with disabilities are hungry for a new approach that places their children on a stronger trajectory of learning. By being intentional about communicating and engaging these families, states, districts, and schools implementing personalized learning can leverage this precious resource to the benefit of all students, not just those with disabilities.



CONCLUSIONS

For students with disabilities, their families, and educators, there is great promise in personalized learning. Early studies evaluating outcomes for all students have been positive, and the approach is philosophically aligned with long-standing best practices in special education.^Δ The approach also comes with tangible challenges that often reflect the hard work necessary to achieve its benefits. Overcoming those challenges and achieving those benefits requires commitment, investment, and action to make the equity promise of these initiatives a reality.

In the meantime, we need to be honest about what personalized learning can and can't do. There is no expectation that the approach will solve all problems facing students with disabilities, nor should there be an expectation that a particular outcome—such as eventual graduation from a four-year university—is the expected or desired marker of success for all students. It is, however, a fair hope that personalized learning efforts will allow all students, including those disabilities, greater access to opportunities to meet their aspirations and interests.

We should expect every student to have the equality of opportunity spelled out in IDEA to achieve his or her fullest potential. We should not tolerate policies or attitudes that reduce that potential. Our hope should be that, in considering ways to minimize challenges and seize opportunities, personalized learning can be a gateway to the inclusive, successful educational experiences that special and general educators have sought for decades.



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* Competency Works, "Aligning K-12 State Policies with Competency Education: What Is Competency Education?" (Vienna, VA: iNACOL, 2014)

† Note NCLD's definition was adapted from a definition of personalized learning developed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Δ Mette Huberman et al., *The Shape of Deeper Learning: Strategies, Structures, and Cultures in Deeper Learning Network High Schools* (Washington, DC: American Institutes of Research, 2014). Kristina Zeiser et al., *Evidence of Deeper Learning Outcomes* (Washington, DC: American Institute of Research, 2014); Elizabeth Steiner et al., *Continued Progress: Promising Evidence on Personalized Learning* (Continued Progress: Promising Evidence on Personalized Learning: Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015).
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